

Sexual allegations against Joseph Smith, 1829-1835
By Grant H. Palmer

It is commonly known among LDS members that Joseph Smith Jr. practiced polygamy, beginning with his first documented polygamist marriage to Louisa Beaman on 5 April 1841. However, prior to these marriages, it is generally unknown that from 1829-1835, he was accused of illicit sexual conduct with **six young women**. What follows is a brief synopsis of each of these incidents.

[1] Joseph Smith Jr. was arrested on a warrant for several charges on 30 June 1830. The following day a court trial was held before Judge Joseph Chamberlain at Bainbridge, New York. Twelve witnesses were called, including **Miriam and Rhoda Stowell**, daughters of Josiah Stowell of Bainbridge. Smith and Mr. Stowell had worked together searching for a silver mine from October 1825 to March 1826. During this five month period, Joseph frequently associated with the Stowell girls who were eighteen and twenty years of age.¹ The prosecutor seeking to determine the “character and conduct” [sexual behavior] of Joseph Smith called them as witnesses either because of rumors brought to his attention regarding Joseph and the girls, or because he was simply fishing to find something against his character. Both girls “were severally examined ... particularly as to my [Joseph Smith’s] behavior towards them, both in public and in private.” Apparently nothing came of these sexual accusations.²

[2] The prosecutor may have called the Stowell girls as witnesses in the 1830 trial because of earlier sexual accusations made against Smith in nearby Harmony, Pennsylvania. When Joseph and his wife Emma Hale Smith were living in Harmony in 1828-1829, Emma’s cousin, Levi Lewis, accused Joseph of attempting “to seduce **Eliza Winters**,” Emma’s close friend. **[Incorrect - Levi Lewis quoted Harris allegedly saying Joseph tried to seduce Winters]** Lewis further said that he was well “acquainted with Joseph Smith Jr. and Martin Harris, and that he has heard them both say, [that] adultery was no crime. Harris said he did not blame Smith for his attempt to seduce Eliza Winters.”³ Elizabeth [Eliza] Winter was born in 1812, making her sixteen years old at the time. She “was often at Smith’s home and much in Mrs. Smith’s company. The young women were on very intimate terms,” said Harmony resident, Mrs. Rhamanthus M. Stocker.⁴ Joseph and Emma’s abrupt May 1829 departure from Harmony, may have been precipitated in part by Levi Lewis’s accusations that Joseph had acted improperly toward Miss Winters. Fifty years later, Levi’s brother, Hiel Lewis, repeated these same sexual accusations against Smith in the *Amboy [IL.] Journal*.⁵

[3] Similar sexual allegations were made against Joseph Smith Jr., in Hiram, Ohio, at the John Johnson home on 24 March 1832. Joseph and Emma were living with the Johnson family at the time. Luke Johnson, later to be one of the twelve apostles, was still single at twenty-five and living with his parents when the incident occurred. He wrote:

[W]hile Joseph was yet at my father’s, a mob of forty or fifty came to his house, a few entered his room in the middle of the night, and Carnot Mason dragged Joseph out of bed by the hair of his head; he was then seized by as many as could get hold of him, and taken about forty rods

from the house, stretched on a board, and tantalized in the most insulting and brutal manner; they tore off the few night clothes that he had on, for the purpose of emasculating him, and had Dr. Dennison there to perform the operation [castration]; but when the Dr. saw the Prophet stripped and stretched on the plank, his heart failed him, and he refused to operate. The mob ... in attempting to force open his jaws, they broke one of his front teeth to pour a vial of some obnoxious drug [aqua-fortis, a poison] into his mouth. The mob [then] became divided [because they] did not succeed, ... but [instead had to settle for] poured tar over him, and then stuck feathers in it and left him ... [then] part of the mob went to the house that Sidney Rigdon occupied, and dragged him out, and besmeared him with tar and feathers.

Persons identified as being part of this attack besides Mason and Dr. Dennison, included Simonds Ryder, Warren Waste, Jacob Scott, a man named Fullar, and Eli Johnson. Many of these men had recently apostatized from the church.⁶ The mob action of March 24th, appears to have occurred for two reasons. Ryder said the attack occurred because “a plot was laid to take their property from them and place it under the control of Smith.”⁷ Eli Johnson was more specific. He was troubled because Smith and Rigdon were urging his brother John Johnson to “let them have his property,”⁸ and was “furious because he suspected Joseph of being intimate with his sister [actually she was his sixteen year old niece⁹], **Nancy Mirinda Johnson**, and he was screaming for Joseph’s castration.”¹⁰ Unsolicited sexual behaviors may have been the more urgent reason. The attack took place “in the middle of the night,” suggesting a crime that would arouse immediate action. Procuring the services of Dr. Dennison prior to the attack also suggests a crime of passion may have been committed.

[4] Rumors about Joseph Smith’s sexual behavior multiplied in Kirtland, Ohio, from 1832-1835. Benjamin F. Winchester, [sic] a close friend of the prophet said the Kirtland accusations of scandal and “licentious conduct” against Smith was discussed, “especially among the women. Joseph’s name was connected with scandalous relations with two or three families.”¹¹ Martin Harris in recalling a second incident from the early Kirtland period, said: “In or about the year 1833” Joseph’s “servant girl” [**a Ms. Hill**] claimed that the prophet had made “improper proposals to her, which created quite a talk amongst the people.” When Smith came to him for advice, Harris, supposing that there was nothing to the story, told him to “take no notice of the girl, that she was full of the devil, and wanted to destroy the prophet of God.” But, according to Harris, Smith “acknowledged that there was more truth than poetry in what the girl said.” Harris then said that “he would have nothing to do in the matter,” and that Smith would have to “get out of the matter the best way he knew how.”¹²

William E. McLellin, a former Mormon apostle, relates the details of this incident, including how Joseph resolved “the matter” with Emma. Writing to their oldest son, Joseph Smith III, McLellin said: “Your Mother (if she feels disposed) can give you a rather *black catalogue* [of events] reaching back as far as your birth” [1832]. McLellin began with the “Miss Hill” incident:

I visited your Mother and family in 1847 [August 28th], and held a lengthy conversation with her, retired in the Mansion house in Nauvoo. I did not ask her to tell, but I told her some stories I had heard. And she told me whether I was properly informed. Dr. F[rederick] G. Williams [a member of the First Presidency of the Church during the Ms. Hill incident] practiced [medicine] with me in Clay Co. Mo. during the latter part of 1838. And he told me that at your birth [6 November 1832] your father committed an act with a Miss Hill—a hired girl. Emma saw him, and spoke to him. He desisted, but Mrs. Smith refused to be satisfied. He called in Dr. Williams ... [and others] to reconcile Emma. But she told them just as the circumstances took place. He found he was caught. He confessed humbly, and begged forgiveness. Emma and all forgave him. She told me this story was true!!

[5] A third Kirtland incident occurred in 1835, with nineteen year old **Fanny Ward** Alger, one of ten children born to church members Samuel and Clarissa Alger. Continuing his narrative of events to Joseph III, McLellin said:

Again, I told her [Emma] I heard that one night she missed Joseph and Fanny Alger. She went to the barn and saw him and Fanny in the barn together alone. She looked through a crack and saw the transaction!!! She told me this story *too* was true.¹³

Associate President Oliver Cowdery said that he learned of this incident from Joseph Smith and that Joseph had confided to him that “he had confessed to Emma,” seeking her forgiveness.¹⁴ Fanny Alger and her family left Kirtland, in September 1836 and moved to Dublin, Indiana, where she married non-Mormon Solomon Custer shortly after on 16 November 1836. Joseph Smith never saw Fanny Alger again.¹⁵ Cowdery was probably the first to openly talk about the Alger affair. In November 1837, he “insinuate[d] that Joseph Smith Jr. was guilty of adultery” in a conversation with George W. Harris and again with Apostle David W. Patten.¹⁶ In a letter to his brother Warren Cowdery on 21 January 1838, Oliver was more blunt. He referred to Smith’s deed as “a dirty, nasty, filthy affair of his and Fanny Algers.”¹⁷ On 12 April 1838, Oliver was excommunicated, with nine charges listed, the second being for “seeking to destroy the character of President Joseph Smith jr by falsly insinuating that he was guilty of adultery.”¹⁸

During an eighteen month period from 1841-1843, documentary evidence reveals that Joseph Smith married thirty-three plural wives. Eleven were single girls, ages thirteen to nineteen; another eleven were single women over age nineteen; and eleven were married women.¹⁹ One Mormon scholar has claimed that Fanny Alger was Joseph’s first polygamist wife.²⁰ However, to make the case compelling; the following observations need to be addressed. (1) There is no marriage license or record of the ordinance. (2) There is no revelation authorizing polygamous marriages until 1840. Joseph Smith may have talked about polygamy in Kirtland, but there is no evidence that he practiced it until 1841, in Nauvoo, Illinois. (3) Joseph Smith did not claim the power to “bind on earth and seal in the heavens” eternally, until Elijah appeared to himself and

Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland temple on 3 April 1836, perhaps sometime after the Alger incident.²¹ (4) Fanny left the state and quickly rejected counsel by marrying a non-Mormon, something one would not expect from a Mormon plural wife.

Sometimes a spouse's intuition tells them if their partner has been sexually unfaithful. Emma Smith said that with Joseph she "knew." William McLellin later recorded in his notebook his extended conversation with Emma Smith on 28 August 1847: "Mrs. Joseph Smith, the widow of the Prophet, told me in 1847 that she **knew** her husband – the Prophet practiced both adultery and polygamy."²²

Sexual allegations involving Eliza Winters, Nancy Miranda Johnson, Ms. Hill, Fanny Alger and perhaps Miriam and Rhoda Stowell were made against the character of Joseph Smith from 1829-1835. As a married man Joseph Smith must have been mortified to be accused of improper sexual conduct with at least four young women during this six year period. Each reader can evaluate these allegations for themselves.

Endnotes

1. William Henry Harrison Stowell, *Stowell Genealogy* (Rutland VT: Tuttle Co., 1922), 230. Miriam was born 22 May 1807; Rhoda, 11 March 1805.

2. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1989), 1:314; *Ibid*, 254n2.

3. Affidavit of Levi Lewis, 20 Mar. 1834, *Susquehanna Register and Northern Pennsylvanian*, 1 May 1834, 1. For Harris's 1828-1829 alleged view that 'adultery was no crime,' see the following. Prior to 1829, Lucy Harris, Martin's wife, said of her husband's behavior with a Mrs. Haggard: "[H]e spent most of his leisure hours [with Mrs. Haggard]; and made her presents of articles from the store and [our] house. He carried these presents in a private manner, and frequently when he went there, he would pretend to be going to some of the neighbors, on an errand, or to be going into the fields. After getting out of sight of the house, he would steer a straight course for Haggard's house, especially if [Mr.] Haggard was from home, At times when Haggard was from home, he would go there in the manner above described, and stay till twelve or one o'clock at night, and sometimes until day light" (Affidavit of Lucy Harris, 1 Dec., 1833, in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: by the Author, 1834, 256; qtd. in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:36). In March 1830 a revelation addressed to Martin Harris warned him: "I command thee that thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife; nor seek thy neighbor's life" (D&C 19:25). Ezra Booth, a group companion to Martin Harris in Missouri, in 1831, wrote shortly after his apostasy to Rev. Ira Eddy, on 6 Dec. 1831: "[I]t has been made known by revelation [see revelation to Joseph Smith, July 1831, in H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text & Commentary* (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 1999), 374-76.], that it will be pleasing to the Lord, should they [the single Elders] form a matrimonial alliance with the Natives; and by this means the Elders, who comply with the thing so pleasing to the Lord, and for which the Lord has promised to bless those who do it abundantly ... It has been made known to one [Harris], who has left his wife in the State of New York [Harris was in Missouri], that he is entirely free from his wife, and he is at pleasure to take him a wife from among the Lamanites. It is easily perceived that this permission was perfectly suited to his desires. I have frequently heard him state that the Lord had made it known to him, that he is as free

from his wife as from any other women; and the only crime I ever heard alleged against her is, she is violently opposed to Mormonism” (qtd. in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 220).

4. *Early Mormon Documents* 4+ vols. ed., Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996-), 4:346.

5. Hiel Lewis, “That Mormon History – Reply to Elder Cadwell,” *Amboy [IL.] Journal*, 5 Aug. 1879, 1.

6. *The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: the 1846 and 1847 Mormon trail Journals of Thomas Bullock*, ed., Will Bagley (Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1997), 107; Luke Johnson, “The History of Luke Johnson,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, 17 Dec. 1864, 834-36; Brigham Young, 15 Nov. 1864, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854-86) 11:4-6. Young was not yet a church member when this incident occurred.

7. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples’ Church in the Western Reserve*, 221, qtd. in William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 134-35; rpt. in Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1977), 146.

8. S. F. Whitney (Newel’s brother), in Arthur B. Deming, ed., *Naked Truths About Mormonism* 1 (Oakland CA, Apr. 1888), 1; rpt. in Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, 466n10. Eliphaz Johnson was John Johnson’s brother, not his son. See LDS Family History Library under the family group record of Israel Johnson, 2.

9. Nancy was born 28 June 1815, making her sixteen year’s old, see LDS Family History Suite – CD Rom.

10. Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, 146, 466n10; also in Edmund L. Kelley and Clark Braden, *Public Discussion of the Issues between the RLDS Church and the Church of Christ (Disciples) Held in Kirtland, Ohio, Beginning February 12, and Closing March 8, 1884* (Lamoni, IA: Herald Publishing House, 1913), 202.

11. Benjamin Winchester, “Primitive Mormonism” *The Daily Tribune* (Salt Lake City), 22 Sept. 1889.

12. Martin Harris qtd. in Anthony Metcalfe, ca. 1873, *Ten Years before the Mast* (Malad ID: Author, 1888), 72.

13. William E. McLellin to Joseph Smith III, 10 Jan. 1861; and *ibid*, July 1872, 3, Library-Archives, Community of Christ (RLDS), emphasis mine. Fanny Alger was born 30 Sept. 1816, making her nineteen years old, LDS Family History Suite – CD Rom.

14. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 167.

15. Richard S. Van Wagener, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 10, 227n14.

16. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 167.

17. Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 21 Jan. 1838. Original in Huntington Library, copy LDS archives.

18. Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 162-63.

19. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 4-7.

20. *Ibid*, 26-33.

21. See Doctrine and Covenants 110:13-16; 128:10.

22. William E. McLellin Notebook, ca. 1880, John L. Traugher Collection, Ms 666, Manuscripts Division, J. Willard Marriott Library, U of U, Salt lake City, emphasis mine. A photograph from this document was published in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 2 Dec. 1985. On 6 Sept. 1878, McLellin was visited by Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt. Joseph F. recorded in his diary: “He [McLellin] said Emma Smith told him that Joseph was both a polygamist and an adulterer ...” Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 239.